

## Facets of Performing Motherhood in Silas Marner

**Sampurna Chowdhury**

M.A. in English from Lady Brabourne College, Calcutta University

### Abstract

*Motherhood is a blessing, an illuminating experience in the life of a person. Often, society ascribes motherhood to the female sex. Alluding to Judith Butler's argument in Gender Trouble, where it is mentioned that gender is a "set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame", motherhood is a feminine performance that can be acted by both sexes equally. With the coming of a child into a person's life, his/her life gets a purpose, a new meaning and a new identity. George Eliot's Silas Marner, narrates the story of how a misfortunate, 'pallid looking' linen weaver's barren life got quenched by the flowing river of the small child, Eppie. Eppie was not his biological child; she came as a blessing turned away from the door of her rich 'gentleman' father, Godfrey Cass, as she was a product of his illegitimate marriage with a woman, below his rank. Even, her biological mother, Molly failed to perform her sacred duty of motherhood and instead became busy performing the role of a vengeful wife. But destiny had ordained other plans, due to which Molly succumbed to premature death, and Eppie found her way following the bright light into Silas' cottage. From the first instance, a maternal instinct arose within the wretched weaver with a growing claim upon the unknown child. And, even Eppie, clutched Marner, crying and calling 'Mammy', as if forming a bond of a mother and its child. Thus, Godfrey Cass failed to perform the duty of Motherhood and then when he came to claim Eppie after sixteen long years, she refused to choose luxury over love. She firmly asserted that she owes her entire love and allegiance to the person, who was the first to love and nurture her. The text Silas Marner makes it apparent that motherhood cannot be thrust upon by biological or natural claims, it needs to be acquired and mediated through the soul.*

**Keywords-** Blessing, Judith Butler, performance, claim, love.

"A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity. It dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path" – *The Last Séance*, Agatha Christie.

In the reflection of Christie's poignant lines, a mother's love is universally accepted to be all-encompassing. Mothers play the dual role of being an indomitable vanguard as well as the overwhelming fountain of love for their children. With the coming of a child, a person attains a new meaning in its life. But this new sense of purpose and identity, comes with a new set of responsibilities as well. Mothers are considered to be the epitome of sacrifice, as they think about the child first, even before thinking about themselves. But, being a mother and to perform

the duty of motherhood are not the same thing. Everyone cannot perform the role of motherhood, because it comes with a lot of patience and mediation through soul. Society generally ascribes motherhood to be an attribute of female sex, because of their reproductive capabilities. But with the evolvement of social and literary theories, people have started to comprehend the fluidity of the gender roles. And, with this, motherhood being a performative role, cannot be ascribed to any particular sex.

### **Motherhood- a performance**

In our life, whatever we do is a performance, as our self remains one and only the roles ascribe to us, give us different identities. And, some roles get prioritized in our lives over the others. According to American philosopher and gender theorist, Judith Butler, gendered behaviour is a performance that is imposed upon us by normative heterosexuality. They (Butler's preferred pronoun) say about that gender is a stylized repetition of acts...which are internally discontinuous... [so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform the mode of belief. To say that gender is performative is to argue that gender is real only to the extent that it is performed.

According to Butler, the reality enacted by our bodies is fictional that is socially constructed. It can be concluded that though a person can perform its gender, again, it gets restricted by a socially bounded performance. This puts the individual at a critical juncture. However, sometimes situations or fate decide for them, even before they get to decide for themselves.

In *Silas Marner* too, Fate has a huge role to play. The interplay of the lives of three characters, Godfrey Cass, Molly Farren and Silas Marner, surrounding the little child Eppie would not have come to play, if it would not have been the hands of fate. The three characters are not only different in their social strata, but even their personal dispositions and each one is rewarded for their performance of 'Motherhood'. Fate had given chance to each one of them, to play their role, but to be able to do it selflessly as the duty recalls it, is not everyone's cup of tea. Molly Farren being Eppie's biological mother, is duty bound to perform her duty towards her child. Godfrey Cass also has a paternal hold upon the child. But both relegates them duty towards Eppie. However, Silas Marner, who has no blood connection Eppie, becomes her universe, her everything.

### **Molly – the unfortunate mother**

“More it hurt more better it is. Can’t nothing heal without pain, you know” – *Beloved*, Toni Morrison.

The context to the referred lines recounts the story of an unfortunate mother Sethe, who preferred death over slavery as the better choice for her child, Beloved. But, the pain of this incident used to haunt her. For a mother, to smash the life that she kindled with her own hands are more painful, than killing herself. Nevertheless, Sethe was put into a juncture where she chose the painful option rather than the worse, in the hope that her child would be better dead than remain alive to lead a life that is blotted.

In *Silas Marner*, the readers are plunged into an altogether different situation. Here, the child Eppie is rendered free from the clutches of death. But she was thrust into a life of uncertainty and danger. It was the role play of fate that rendered safety to the little blooming child, who by following the ‘bright glancing light’ toddled on to the door of Silas Marner.

The situation could have turned against the favour of Eppie. The common point of similarity in the two cases of *Beloved* and *Silas Marner*, that can be drawn to attention is the helplessness of both the mothers. In *Silas Marner*, Molly Farren was unfortunate both by choice and compulsion. Eppie’s biological mother, Molly belonged from a humble background, but the main cause of her discomfiture, was that she was the illegitimate wife of Godfrey Cass, the eldest son of the affluent family of Raveloe. Once Godfrey told her, that “...he would sooner die than acknowledge her as his wife” which troubled her the most. (Eliot 174) Rather than leading a life of peace and seclusion, the germ of vengeance got nurtured in her bosom, which contaminated the pure milk of kindness for her little child.

Therefore, Molly became solely focused on her role of a vengeful wife and set out her journey towards Raveloe on the New Year’s Eve. Her steps were ‘slow’ and ‘uncertain’, but she was determined in her ‘premediated course of action’. She was carrying little Eppie with her, unperturbed about the harsh cold weather. The selfish instinct predominated at that time in Molly, which restrained her to think about Eppie. To cope with this frightening cold, she took her usual ‘demon’ which is opium. “In that moment the mother’s love pleaded for painful consciousness rather than oblivion – pleaded to be left in aching weariness, rather than to have the encircling arms benumbed so that they cannot feel the dear burden.” (Eliot 176) And, thus Molly’s motherhood could not gain an empowering influence over her. She chose comfort over duty and left the child abandoned in the mist of future.

But the complete torpor came at last: the fingers lost their tension, the arms unbent; then the little head fell away from the bosom, and the blue eyes opened wide on the cold starlight. At first there was a little peevish cry of ‘mammy’, and an effort to regain the pillowing arm and bosom; but mammy’s ear was deaf and the pillow seemed to be slipping away backward. (Eliot 177) Molly Farren was unfortunate not to acknowledge and remain happy with the blessing, with which she was bestowed. She chose the path of craving for what she was not fated to get. Therefore, avarice brought her premature Dooms’ day.

### **Godfrey Cass – the one who turned down the blessing**

In this world, majority of the people are self- centered, who think about themselves before anything else and, at the cost of their own tranquility, they can even abandon the basic life support of someone. By unacknowledging the relationship with Molly Farren and abandoning Eppie, Godfrey Cass tried to secure his social and mental stability. It was much later, that he understood that what he considered as disgrace, could have given him a wholesome happiness. Though Godfrey Cass was the heir of the Cass estate, he was a good-natured man. But his error of judgement rested with his incapability to take decision, courage and lack of far- sightedness. At the critical moment of taking decision, “Godfrey Cass was taking draughts of forgetfulness from the sweet presence of Nancy, willingly losing all sense of that hidden bond which at other moments galled and fretted him so as to mingle irritation with the very sunshine”. (Eliot 174) He liked to pass all his troubles for the moment to “some favourable chance which would save him from unpleasant consequences”. (Eliot 117) But later all his indecisions resulted in an upheaval of his own life. Godfrey’s unwillingness or irresoluteness to accept his secret marriage in public, lead to an uncertain future of Eppie. Hurt by his ignorance, Molly risked both her and their child’s life, to lead the way towards Raveloe. He remained unperturbed to the death of his ‘first’ wife, and it is suggested in the text, that he felt relieved at that news. Then also, he turned a blind eye towards Eppie. When “The wide-open blue eyes looked up at Godfrey’s without any uneasiness or sign of recognition: the child could make no visible audible claim on its father, and the father felt a strange mixture of feelings, a conflict of regret and joy.” (Eliot 192) But the regret was soon superimposed by his own sense of happiness, and therefore he was ready to abandon it. He did not dare bring up the thought of owning Eppie, for the sole sake of not spoiling his awaited future of glory and prosperity with Nancy Lammeter, who was a pretty young lady belonging from a sophisticated family.

Godfrey should have raised Eppie and performed his duty of motherhood, as he is the sole reason of discord between her and her mother. But he could easily shove off his guilt and moral

obligation. He felt that “he would be much happier without owning the child. He would see that it was cared for, he would do everything, never forsake it, but not own it”. (Eliot 195) What Godfrey failed to realize, that he seemed to abandon the vital duty, failed to create the filial bond which connects a child with her parent. As George Eliot very aptly pens down in her text, “The evil principle deprecated in the religion, is the orderly sequence by which the seed brings forth a crop of its kind”. (Eliot 118) Therefore, the actions done by Godfrey himself, led him to get his deserving punishment in the hands of Nemesis. He failed to comprehend the necessity of being a mother in the life of Eppie, and therefore, he would be bereft of the joy of having a daughter.

### **Silas Marner – the honest rewarded soul**

“No legacy is so rich as honesty” – *All's Well That Ends Well*, William Shakespeare. The lines used by ‘The Avon Bard’ can be alluded to the honesty of Silas Marner who gets rewarded at the very end. Silas is described as a mysterious ‘peculiar-looking man with short-sighted brown eyes’. Such a pallid description immediately leads to the conclusion in the mind of the reader, that how it is possible for such a secluded person to perform the role of motherhood. Well, Silas’ present disposition had been due to his past life, where he had been charged for the robbery and murder of the senior deacon. The innocent man was shattered and lost his love and belief in God and humankind.

The journey from Lantern Yard to Raveloe was metaphoric in a way, where he finds a meaningful purpose in his life. Though at first, he became blinded by the work of weaving, and hoarding guineas. It was not at all a material satisfaction that Silas got by hoarding the gold coins, instead he considered them with motherly affection as his ‘unborn children’. “He spread them out in heaps and bathed his hands in them; then he counted them and set them up in regular piles, and felt their rounded outline between his thumb and fingers and thought fondly of the guineas that were only half-earned by the work in his loom...” (Eliot 30) Though this never-ending work helped Marner to remain in oblivion of his past, but this binded him into a loop, making him an alienated being. The man who uttered blasphemy “there is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies, that bears witness against the innocent” hardly knew what Fate had already ordained for him. (Eliot 17)

When the little Eppie had been bereft from her biological mother’s bosom, she followed the ‘bright glancing light’ to the open door of Silas’ cottage. While Eppie comforted herself in the sack being warmed by the heat of the hearth, “like a new-hatched gosling”, she was completely

unnoticed by Silas. He was caught by the epileptic fit, the same fit that was considered ‘the visitation of Satan’ in Lantern Yard, which became a blessed moment in New Years’ Eve in Raveloe. When his “unborn children” got stolen, he tried to cling to a fancy that a magical moment would restore him his gold. And, to his very surprise, he saw – Gold! – his gold brought back to him as mysteriously as it had been taken away! ...The heap of gold seemed to glow and get larger beneath his agitated gaze. He leaned forward at last, and stretched forth his hand; but instead of the hard coin with the familiar resisting outline, his fingers encountered soft warm curls. In utter amazement Silas fell on his knees and bent his head low to examine the marvel: it was a sleeping child- a round, fair thing, with soft yellow rings all over its head... (Eliot 180).

From then on, Eppie became the river that quenched Silas’ heart which was barren like a desert. The shackles of confinement created by the monotonous work of spinning and hoardings were replaced by the sacred duty of motherhood. When the neighbourhood kind lady, Dolly willingly agreed to help out Silas, he seemed to jealously guard Eppie like his own child, reiterating the fact that he would learn and do everything by himself for her, lest she grows less fond of him. And, Dolly admitted, “I’ve seen men are as wonderful handy with the children” (Eliot 199). Eppie became now the sole purpose of his meaning in life and she became the spring of rejuvenation, for which Silas now became known as a noble soul in the entire community of Raveloe.

Despite not having any sort of biological bonding with the child, Silas fostered such a strong bond with Eppie, that he “would part with his life, then with Eppie” (Eliot 256). This sort of selfless and untarnished love holds the testament of the pure unadulterated love that mothers bestow upon their children. Therefore, it can be again proved, that mothers have no gender. Motherhood is a role that can be performed by either male or female, but the true reward is given to the awardee who commits his/her life to the well-being of the youngster.

### **Victory of Love over Luxury**

“Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive.”- Dalai Lama.

It is a universally accepted fact that love wins over all the hurdles in the world. Mothers are known to be the embodiment of love, where there remains no want, no greed, and no expectations of reciprocation. When Molly left Eppie leaving all her tensions behind, when Godfrey did not think twice to desert her, Silas took the orphan child in his bosom and nurtured

her as his child. Neither did he know the identity of the child, nor did he own him with the expectation of being rewarded because he considered Eppie itself to be a blessing from God.

After sixteen years of this father-daughter relationship, suddenly Godfrey emerged with the claim on Eppie. Godfrey Cass being abandoned from the happiness of begetting a child, revealed to his wife, Nancy his darkest secret and they immediately thought of adopting Eppie. When they arrived at the footsteps of Silas' home and slowly placed their proposal, it seemed to Silas that again he would be wronged by the trickster Fate. Though he got back his guineas, but he now no longer holds an inch of attachment, compared to the inseparable bond that he shared with Eppie. Godfrey said that Eppie meant to have a life of comfort rather than a harsh and tough life, moreover strengthening on the fact that his claim is "the strongest of all claims... a natural claim on her that must stand before every other", then Silas could not contain his silence (Eliot 275). He spurted out, then, sir, why didn't you say so sixteen years ago, and claim her before I'd come to love her, instead oncoming to take her from me now, when you might well take the heart out o' my body? God gave her to me because you turned your back upon her, and He looks upon her as mine: you've no right to her! When a man turns a blessing from his door, it falls to them to take it in. (Eliot 276)

But Godfrey with his ego being hurt, would not accept his defeat easily and so he blamed Silas for coming in the midst of Eppie's happiness and what she deserves. This statement benumbed Silas entirely, as he was deeply hurt. But equally hurt was the small eighteen-year child Eppie. She was entirely baffled by the contest between her 'old long loved father' and 'new unfamiliar father' who tried to put a claim on her, by means of a natural hold as well as alluring her by the deserving wealth and position, which she had been abandoned for so long. It was the sole decision of Eppie, which could make her princess from the pauper, that she deserved on the one hand but on the other hand, it would make her foster father, a living dead forlorn soul once again.

Eppie here acts as the messenger of Fate, who rewards the true soul and gives punishment to the one, who turns her Nelson's eye. Between the battle of love and luxury, she prioritized the unadulterated love that Silas had bestowed on her. The last words gave a befitting reply to Godfrey Cass' high expectations,

... For I should have no delight i' life any more if I was forced to go away from my father, and knew he was sitting at home, a-thinking of me and feeling lone. We've been used to be happy together every day, and I can't think of no happiness without him...And he's taking care and

loved me from the first, and I'll cleave to him as long as he lives, and nobody shall ever come between him and me....I can't feel as I've got any father but one. I've always thought of a little home where he'd sit i' the corner, and I should fend and do everything for him: I can't think o' no other home. I wasn't brought up to be a lady, and I can't think o' no other home... (Eliot 280 – 282) Therefore, in this battle between love and luxury, love overpowered all the bonds, even the natural claim that Godfrey had on Eppie. Then, Godfrey realized that the dereliction of duty shown by him, resulted him to being childless against his wish. And the novel concludes on Eppie's sweet note, "O father ... I think nobody can be happier than we are". (Eliot 297).

### Conclusion

By taking a closer analysis at the text of *Silas Marner*, one can understand that motherhood is not associated with the one who bears a child, but by one who rears her. This sacred thread cannot be owned by a natural claim or by force, it has to be gained by love and care. Silas despite not sharing any biological bond with Eppie, tied her with the bond of selfless love, which no force can overtake. Molly Farren became the victim of an unfortunate situation, though she herself paved the path of an uncertain future for her child. Therefore, in the truest sense Silas emerged as the true mother for Eppie and thus he was rewarded by the unconditional love of the innocent child. As George Eliot very aptly points out that perfect love has a breadth of poetry which can be discerned by even the ignorant, and this made Eppie to make the correct choice, that is the choice of her conscience.



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